



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 19
Proper 23 (A)
October 11, 2020

RCL: Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14

Exodus 32:1-14

This is a story of memory and lack of memory. The Israelites become impatient waiting for Moses to come down off the mountain, so they complain to Aaron. They are ready to move on from the mountain and ask Aaron to make it happen. They remember enough to know that they need a god to lead them, but not enough to remember the LORD. Aaron foolishly gives in to them, collects gold from among them, and makes a calf from it. He then proclaims a feast of the LORD, but they take the day as a feast of the new god, the calf.

The LORD God sees all this, gets angry, and tells Moses that although God will destroy the people, the promise made to Abraham will be fulfilled in him. Moses reminds the LORD of his mercy and promise, and adds for good measure, “What will the Egyptians think?” So, God remembers and changes his mind.

This is one of several stories in the Hebrew Scriptures where the argument of one faithful person leads God to change his mind about the destruction of a people. Arguing with God in the Scriptures can give us warrant to do the same in our own lives. However, the notion that God changes – his mind or any other way – is a challenge to the Greco-Roman idea that God is immutable. Much scholarly ink has been spilled trying to reconcile these things!

- How do you see the role of memory in the life of faith?
- Do you argue with God? What do you do in prayer when you are angry?
- How does the idea of divine immutability square with your personal theology?

Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23

This psalm begins with a verse of thanksgiving for the goodness of God and moves into remembrance of God’s past favor for Israel and a benediction for the righteous. The fourth and fifth verses ask for the Lord to remember the psalmist, standing for the people, as God remembers the ancient people of Israel, in order that they will see prosperity, be glad, and partake of the glory of God’s people in the present.

The sixth verse is a hinge in which we learn why the psalmist needs God to remember them: the people have sinned as their forebears did in the desert. Verses 19-23 recount the story we have heard in the first lesson today. Moses interceded for the people after their infidelity and God did not destroy them for it.

This whole psalm is a kind of *anamnesis*: the psalmist recalls and makes real again in this time what happened in that ancient time. The psalmist is in the place of Moses, interceding for the people. The hope is that God, who is merciful, will forgive the present sin of the people.

- What are the “mighty acts of the Lord” that you would recount if this psalm were your own?
- What idols challenge the reign of God today?
- How does this act of anamnesis resemble that of the Great Thanksgiving in the Eucharist?

Philippians 4:1-9

This section of the letter to the Philippians comes just after Paul has said that he considers all that he once had as rubbish compared to life in Christ. That’s the immediate context for “stand firm in this way,” that is, follow Paul’s example. The section is an exhortation to living in God’s peace.

It seems from the second and third verses that there is some contention in the community and that mediation may be needed between two of the leaders, Euodia and Syntyche. Peace may need to be restored, not just enjoyed. It is interesting that Paul commends these two women to his “loyal companion,” since they have worked alongside Paul in spreading the Gospel. It is evidence that women had a significant place in the church at Philippi – and possibly elsewhere – since they are named along with men whom Paul names as coworkers.

Verses 4-9 are instructions on how to experience God and God’s peace in the community. Here, Paul urges the community, not individuals, to rejoice always, to be unworried, and to pray constantly so that God’s peace may rest on them. In these verses, Paul returns to exhorting the entire community to live in Christ Jesus, a life worthy of the Gospel (and like that of Paul).

The tension between the individual and the communal experience of the church was as real for the early Christian communities as it is today in our culture of individualism.

- How do you go about dealing with individuals who are at odds in the community?
- What do you think is the best way to explore the tension between the individual and communal dimensions of Christian life in community?
- What in today’s culture would meet the qualifications that Paul sets out in verses 8 and 9?

Matthew 22:1-14

This is one of a series of teachings about the Kingdom of God in Matthew. Most commentators agree about one thing: this parable is perplexing. On the one hand, after refusals by the initial guests, the king commands that everyone in the streets be invited to the banquet. On the other hand, someone who isn’t

ressed properly for the feast is harshly excluded by the king. There is no one “takeaway” that wraps it up. The passage ends with the enigmatic, “Many are called, but few are chosen.”

Reading the parable as an allegory is typical, seeing the king as God, the first invited guests as Israel, and the guests recruited from the streets as the Gentiles. While this may be a reasonable approach, the interpretation runs the risk of supersessionism and anti-Semitism by portraying God as rejecting Israel.

An alternative approach to this parable is to emphasize the universality of invitation; everyone is invited to the Kingdom of God. We are not accepted on the basis of merit or good works. The invitation is free, not dependent on worthiness. God continues to invite, even when we make excuses about not going and turn away from God. That’s Good News.

- How do you understand the reign of God? What metaphor would you use for it?
- “Many are called, but few are chosen.” What does this saying mean to you?
- Do you often read the parables as allegories? Why or why not?

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